Student motivation, intercultural competence and transnational higher education: Uzbekistan, a case study

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Abstract: This paper investigates some of the cross-cultural challenges faced by faculty members teaching transnational higher education in a foreign country. It employs the intercultural competence process model and attempts to provide some best practices that are already implemented in an international branch campus (IBC) in Uzbekistan. Hopefully, this sharing of practices will develop intercultural competence and better prepare transnational faculty members to be more efficient and effective in motivating students in transnational education programmes. Furthermore, apart from increased motivation for students, this important professional development initiative for faculty teaching staff may lead to improvement in learning outcomes over time.

Keywords: transnational teaching; professional development; intercultural competency; motivation

Introduction

With the advancement of worldwide network communications and technological innovations coupled with the strategic globalisation of higher education institutions (HEIs), the nature of international higher education is evolving. Students now have more choices in selecting foreign universities even within their home countries, either through attending classes at the international branch campuses (IBCs), collaborative public/private institutions, or via online platforms. This form of education is known as transnational higher education (THE) with the foreign universities referred to as transnational institutions, and the students, as transnational students. Indeed, the competition among universities in providing THE is increasingly intense. The consequence is that the nature of learning and teaching has also changed significantly. The availability of THE business opportunities attracts many new players including public and private, international and national, profit and not-for-profit organisations with varied alliances or partnerships that motivate innovative approaches to teaching and delivery.

Within the IBC perspective, foreign faculty members are usually sent from the home institution to teach students in the host country for a short period of time, which is known as transnational teaching (Smith, 2010). As such, block teaching by the fly-in fly-out (FIFO) faculty members is common. These transnational faculty members have a demanding schedule, since they must simultaneously manage their courses at the home institution while teaching intensive blocks of classes at the host country (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007). The faculty members travel and teach on weekends, usually Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, or for a full week made up of eight-hour teaching days. Within these 3 - 5 days of teaching, the students usually have to take annual leaves from their full-time job, concentrate and focus on absorbing the entire module contents taught by the flown in faculty members. In addition, the students also try to gather some

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focus areas for exam preparation as the flown in faculty member is usually the module leader who is responsible for setting the exam questions (Mok, 2012). However, transnational faculty members are not prepared by the home institutions to meet the challenge of the assignment (Leask, 2008) to teach culturally diverse students from the IBC, apart from formal intercultural competence training (Smith, 2010).

This paper attempts to address some of the cultural issues that transnational faculty members may encounter while teaching in the IBCs in Uzbekistan. It discusses some of the approaches that the foreign faculty members may adopt to teach cross-culturally at an IBC, thereby enhancing student motivation to learn in transnational education environment. By sharing best practices in the application of the intercultural competence process model (Deardorff, 2009), transnational faculty members may benefit by adopting the framework that focuses on three core elements - attitudes, knowledge and comprehension, and skills, so as to prepare them to teach in the international culturally diverse environment. Each components of the intercultural competence theoretical framework will be discussed with the support of real life issues occurring in an IBC of Uzbekistan. Some of the claims, suggestions and recommendations made for the IBC under study and presented in this paper are based on the author's ten years of teaching and managing experiences in the various THE provisions. The author has more than five years experience in managing the entire academic processes of the IBCs, one in Colombo, Sri Lanka and the other in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Most of these claims and suggestions were raised and discussed during dialogue sessions with the transnational faculty members and local lecturers / tutors. Some good cross-cultural teaching methods were recommended and implemented with effective outcomes. The intercultural competence process model, together with the practical and real life issues of the IBC case study in support of the theoretical framework provide a new reference offering a comparative study for future research in the context of intercultural competence and transnational teaching.

Literature Review

The intercultural competence framework comprises attitudes, knowledge and skills (Deardorff, 2009). The essential attitudes include respect, openness, curiosity and discovery of other cultures. Openness and curiosity imply a willingness to risk and to move beyond one's comfort zone. In communicating respect to others, it is important to demonstrate that others are valued. The knowledge necessary consists of cultural self-awareness (meaning the ways in which one's culture has influenced one's identity and worldview), culture-specific knowledge, and deep cultural knowledge including understanding the world from others' perspectives. The skills are the ones that address the acquisition and processing of knowledge, i.e., observing, listening, evaluating, analysing, interpreting, and relating. These attitudes, knowledge and skills ideally lead to an internal outcome that consists of flexibility, adaptability, an ethnorelative perspective and empathy. At this point, individuals are able to see from others' perspectives and to respond to them according to the way in which the other person desires to be treated. Individuals may reach this outcome in varying degrees of success. Finally, the summation of the attitudes, knowledge and skills as well as the internal outcomes are demonstrated through the behaviour and communication of the individual, which become the visible external outcomes of intercultural competence experienced by others. These five overall elements can be visualized through the model of intercultural competence, as illustrated in Figure 1, thereby providing a framework to further guide efforts in developing intercultural competence.
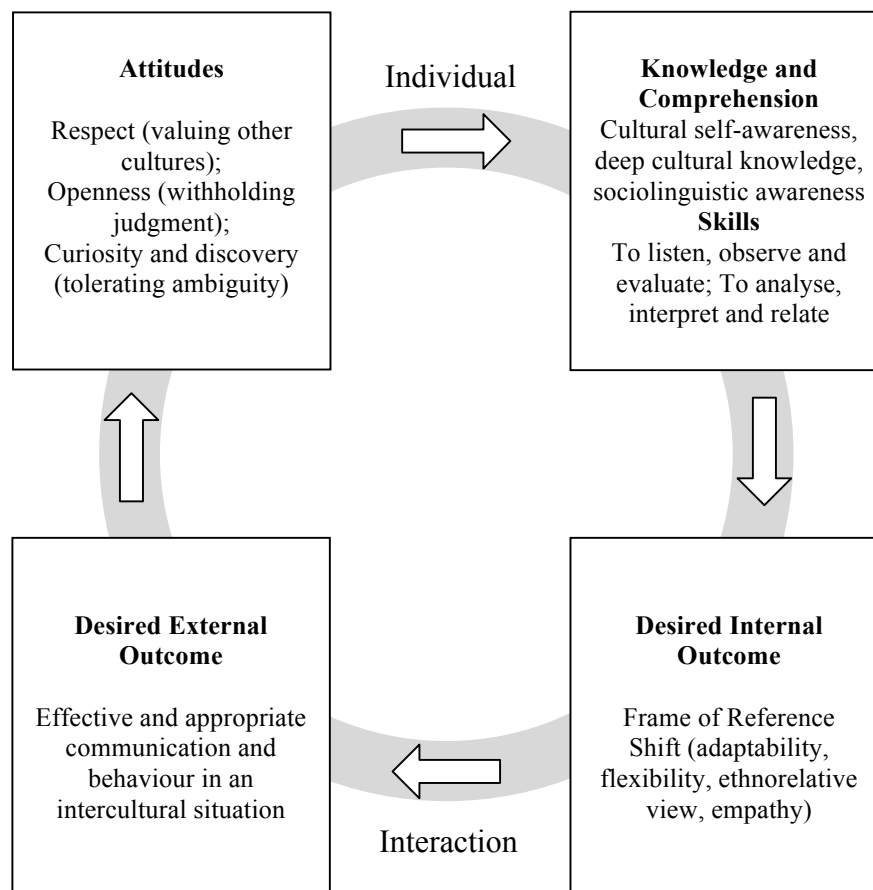
Figure 1: Model of Intercultural Competence (Source: Deardorff, 2009)

An educated and advanced Uzbekistan

In Uzbekistan, the percentage of population with higher education is 9.8 percent (Nessipbayeva & Dalayeva, 2013). This percentage is the lowest among the Central Asia republics. Higher education reforms in Uzbekistan started in 1997 with the adoption of the Education Act and the National Programme for Personnel Training (NPPT). The aim of these initiatives was to increase the percentage of the population with higher education qualifications and to train highly qualified specialists to the equivalent level in advanced or developed states. At present, there are 76 HEIs in Uzbekistan, including 11 joint higher education establishments (EACEA, 2012). These institutions are all legal entities and there are no non-government universities in Uzbekistan (EACEA, 2012).

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, higher education reforms in Uzbekistan moved toward standardised university entrance tests as a criterion for admission. There was also a restructuring away from sectoral ministerial control, encouraged diversification of education provision as well as decentralisation of governance, salary, and tuition structures (Heyneman,

2011; Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008). The implementation of the unified education policy is governed by the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialised Education (MHSSE), which is responsible for the development of the education sector as a whole, including the implementation of education reforms (EACEA, 2012). Generally, the changes were perceived as necessary to enhance the Soviet higher education system embedded in Uzbekistan, while upgrading the system to benchmark against international higher education requirements.

Russian influences on Uzbekistan education

Because Uzbekistan and Russia retain historical, social and economic relationships in the post-Soviet era, the influence on higher education still remains. However, the European Union (EU), especially the Bologna process, has increasingly played an important role in influencing the direction of higher education reforms in Central Asia. Due to the context of these overlapping international influences, the reconfiguration of post-Soviet higher education system in Uzbekistan may result in a hybrid of the East and West model of education system (Silova, 2011).

In an attempt to create its own model of a hybrid system, Uzbekistan has based its higher education reforms primarily on internal references to Soviet educational practices (Tomusk, 2008). Indeed, Russia has established three IBCs of its universities in Uzbekistan to respond to the demand for higher education in the Russian language, particularly the Moscow State University of Lomonosovt, Plekhanov Russian University of Economics and the Russian State Oil and Gas University of Gubkin, all in Tashkent. In this context, Russian based IBCs remain the first choice of HEIs for many Uzbek students, although an increasing number of students, especially those with English language abilities, choose to study in the Western based IBCs. These branch campuses undoubtedly influence higher education in the country and the nearby region by diversifying the available study options and increasing academic competition.

The Bologna Process

In spite of the deep-rooted Russian influence, the higher education reforms have increasingly diverted such influence due to the Bologna process, which has become a major reference point for Uzbekistan in adopting the European education system. Intensive cooperation between the EU and Uzbekistan began in 2007, when the European Education Initiative was launched, as part of the EU-Central Asia Strategy (Jones, 2011). By 2009, the initiative had prioritised higher education and emphasised links with the Bologna process. Since then, international cooperation among HEIs in Uzbekistan has been strong and there are a number of bilateral agreements with foreign universities from 45 countries throughout the world (EACEA, 2012) to foster greater exchange of academic experiences. Through Tempus and Erasmus Mundus External Cooperation Programmes, Uzbek universities have been collaborating with many universities in the EU, with MHSSE maintaining close contacts with the diplomatic missions located in Tashkent. Working relationships have also been established with international organisations, such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), German Academic Exchange Programme (DAAD), the British Council, Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), and UNESCO, in order to foster more fruitful international HEI cooperation (EACEA, 2012).

To advance the process of National Programme for Personnel Training (NPPT) in

Uzbekistan, international higher education cooperation was identified as the highest priority to achieving the objectives. The mechanisms for international cooperation can be in the form of

- international branch campuses (IBCs),
- academic collaboration projects involving foreign lecturers in the teaching at Uzbek universities,
- joint research work with foreign universities, and
- international conferences on current issues like world economics, business trends, science and technology innovations, as well as resources and energy saving.

Large-scale international cooperation, especially the establishment of IBCs and academic collaboration projects, has successfully enhanced the quality of teaching processes among HEIs in Uzbekistan. At present, there are four IBCs, with English as the medium of instruction, established in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, namely the UK Westminster International University in Tashkent (WIUT), Italian Turin Tashkent Polytechnic University (TTPU), South Korea Inha University in Tashkent (IUT), and the Management Development Institute of Singapore in Tashkent (MDIST). These universities were invited to establish their IBCs in Tashkent to assist in this meaningful initiative, share their best education management practices, and provide internationally recognised higher education academic programmes to the tertiary students in Uzbekistan.

Guidelines on educational standards

Guidelines on Educational Standards were developed by MHSSE to define the academic standards including the requirements for the students to attain undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications, for the academic staff to develop their capabilities in strengthening the assessment processes, as well as for the universities to build their capacities in attainting greater accreditation status. It also includes the provisions of collaborations with foreign HEIs in terms of academic teaching and contemporary research work on science and technology, as well as integration of education with commercial and industrial experiences.

Beside the Educational Standards, other priorities in education reform are for domestic universities to

- enhance the teaching of foreign languages, including English, so as to enable students to have better access to information resources,
- adopt new communication technologies and modern pedagogical methodologies in classroom teaching,
- implement educational computing networks for staff and students to access reference materials,
- upgrade the skills of local academic staff through sharing / training sessions with foreign universities faculties,
- develop relevant / updated teaching materials through demand surveys in commercial / industrial markets,
- implement quality assurance / management system, and
- optimise the resource facilities including the construction, renovation, refurbishment of academic buildings, scientific research laboratories, sports centres and student dormitories.

For IBC initiative, Uzbekistan has provided all the necessary conditions to enable a smoother transition to support this initiative, including higher education reform, guidelines on educational

standards, legal advice, qualified personnel, scientific-methodological research facilities, as well as financial arrangements..

Guidelines on intercultural competence

Guidelines on intercultural awareness for teaching in transnational institutions have been generated by the Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE) (Greenholz, 2000). Nonetheless, the studies and monitoring on transnational teaching in cross-cultural environments have been lacking (Gribble & Ziguras, 2003) despite that transnational faculty members are the primary facilitators of students' learning (Johnson, 2003).

Attitude

Developing intercultural understanding begins with the attitude of the faculty members (Crabtree & Sapp, 2004) to recognise and respect the value of other cultures (Deardorff, 2009). The ability to motivate oneself to be open to other cultures can strengthen intercultural adaptability (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009), and suspending ethnocentric (Storti, 2009), assumptions (Dunn & Wallace, 2006) and judgments (Bennett et al., 2003) allows faculty members to be receptive to multiple perspectives.

Knowledge

Knowledge and comprehension is the second core element in the dynamic process of developing intercultural competence. Some societies still hold strong gender stereotypes that are deeply embedded in their cultures (Merriam, 2007). For example, it is common for male students in the IBC under study to approach and shake hands with male transnational faculty members however; this practice is prohibited to all female students. Furthermore, people in Uzbekistan get married in their early 20s, so it is common to see pregnant students in the lecture halls and classrooms. Therefore, certain adjustments may have to be made with respect to teaching spaces and to have more frequent breaks.

Skills

Skills are the third core element in the process of developing intercultural competence. A core element of skills development is self-reflection, which comprises three levels that facilitate cultural transformation, namely content, process and premise reflections (Mezirow, 1998). Content reflection refers to the analysis of roles and the adjustment of relationship between faculty members and students (Gopal, 2011). For instance, in the IBC under study, transnational faculty members stay in the same hostel as the students. Beside the formal lectures and class tutorials, students are able to meet teaching staff in the hostel study room where they mentor students during their free time. Despite staying in the same hostel and providing voluntary coaching, foreign faculty members are required to discipline themselves and to keep a professional distance from the students in order to prevent further development of closer social relationships with them.

As can be seen from the content reflection above, self-reflection involves a subjective understanding of reality that has the value of enabling transnational faculty members to think

about the effect of their actions on the students (Gray, 2007). Process reflection involves the analysis of the situation and the adjustment of actions between faculty members and students (Mezirow, 1998). In Uzbekistan, transnational faculty members may find students sitting at the back of the class not paying attention to teaching. They are either sleeping, talking with fellow classmates, messaging on their phones, playing computer games on their laptops or making creative drawings on their textbooks or study materials. This is a common classroom culture where students are not attentive in class and transnational faculty members may find it difficult to negotiate cross-cultural adjustment (Smith, 2010). They cannot ask the students to leave the classroom as lectures and tutorials require compulsory student attendance. Some transnational faculty members are able to stimulate the students' right brain by encouraging them to draw mindmaps on the topics that they have just learnt. Some foreign faculty members have suggested removing compulsory class attendance; however, if this system is to be implemented, it is likely that more than fifty percent of students will not attend class.

Premise reflection pertains to the analysis of perception and the adjustment of perspectives between faculty members and students (Mezirow, 1998). Many transnational faculty members perceive that students in the IBC are not working hard and usually study two days before the exams. However, a casual chat with students will reveal that they are actually working full-time and studying part-time in order to pay their school fees and accommodation as most of the students travel to university from outside of Tashkent. As soon as the perception is clarified, transnational faculty members would be more willing to provide mentoring to these students during their free time. Perhaps work and lack of sleep accounts for the reason why students are not attentive in class. Furthermore, if non-compulsory student attendance is implemented, more than fifty percent of the students will not attend class, as they need to work in order to pay for their school fees.

Reflexivity is the ability to constantly reflect on the significance of experience (Greenholz, 2000) and improve one's interaction with others. When we are being reflexive, we are aware of the ways in which our interpretations and actions are influenced by others; we become conscious of the rules that guide our context, and are able to explore other contexts and rules for interpreting an action in a situation (Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007). These three points can be illustrated by taking the example of examination process in the IBC under study. During an examination, the guidelines state that students are not permitted to leave the exam hall fifteen minutes before the end of the exam. Nonetheless, when transnational invigilators notice that the amount of talking and cheating is the greatest during the last fifteen minutes and are unable to prevent the talking, a change needs to be implemented. One approach is to modify the exam guidelines and allow those students who have submitted exam scripts in the last fifteen minutes to leave the exam hall, in order to minimise talking and cheating. There are rules and regulations that guide invigilators in the examination process, however, due to the customs that the students have been brought up since their younger school days, these guidelines may have to be modified to suit the local culture. Also due to their full-time jobs, which affect their preparation for the exam, students may resort to talking and cheating during an exam.

Effective communication skills are another key component in developing intercultural competence; such skills will lead to meaningful dialogue and eliminate miscommunication (Hannigan, 1990). Dialogue and feedback sessions are organised between the management and teaching staff every semester in the IBC to share teaching experiences and approaches to handling challenging students. Transnational faculty members are able to voice their concerns during the sharing session, so that the management is able to take timely corrective action, such

as the formation of the disciplinary committee to take actions against students who have difficulty engaging with staff. When transnational faculty members confronted students not paying attention in class, this has resulted in that students behaving impolitely towards them. Instances such as these can be avoided when foreign faculty members understand the students' background through open dialogue and communicating effectively with them.

Transnational faculty members also need to develop active listening skills that require suspending their own judgment and asking clarifying questions (Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007). Never insist on the management changing the culture of the transnational institution; instead offer some constructive suggestions and ideas to modify specific parts of the operational processes, such as removing the compulsory attendance for lectures, arranging all lectures in the morning and tutorials in the afternoon, if you wish to improve student engagement in class. Indeed, it takes time to be able to change the deep-rooted culture in an education institution and the priority of change has to come from the management systems.

Adding the necessary cultural knowledge and skills are to ensure that transnational faculty members can be more effective and appropriate in their intercultural interactions. Transnational faculty members can never become completely inter-culturally competent, but the most important is in the development process, i.e., how they acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Therefore, critical reflection becomes a powerful tool in the process of intercultural competence development. In addition, intercultural competence must be intentionally addressed through programmes, orientations, experiences, and courses, which are essential to be a global-ready transnational faculty member. The framework/model of intercultural competence discussed with support from the case study helps to guide our efforts in ensuring a more comprehensive and integrated approach in enhancing transnational teaching thereby improving student learning outcomes.

Transnational teaching and student motivation

Attribution theory suggests that successful learning outcomes are commonly attributed to the quality of the teacher, instead of the motivation and effort of the learner (Weiner, 1974). This theory might be more applicable to teacher-centred learning in the pre-tertiary education where students are not ready to apply their knowledge that they have learnt. In the tertiary education however, academic staff act as facilitators to enable student-centred learning and encourage independent research and study. Therefore, student self-motivation to acquire academic knowledge and practical skills is a key determinant of their academic attainment, and it is the task of the academic staff to play a contributing role in stimulating student motivation.

Many students (and parents) expect that they will be taught by foreign faculty members from the home institution when they enrol in a transnational academic programme. In the IBC under study, some of the foreign faculty members are contracted from countries like India, Malaysia, the Philippines, Iran, etc. In addition, some lecturers/tutors are engaged locally often on a part-time basis, which may be an effective method of reducing costs, but less effective method of achieving employee commitment and higher levels of teaching engagement (Wilkins, 2010). Nonetheless, local academic staff often have a richer understanding of student needs and as a result, are able to manage and control class discipline. With a good mix of foreign faculty members and local lecturers/tutors, at the end of the module, students will be able to evaluate their lecturers/tutors based on the ability to stimulate their motivation and engagement,

Students of the IBC under study are mainly Uzbek with only a handful of foreign

students from nearby regions such as Ukraine, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and South Korea. As school teaching in the Uzbek language predominates (over 8,800 schools in 2006/7) with a small number of school (about 760 schools in 2006/7) instruction in Russian and other languages (e.g., Russian-English) (UNESCO-IBE, 2011), this might make student learning more challenging as all the modules taught in the IBC are in English. As English is the medium of instruction in the IBC, students' ability to listen and comprehend in class, speak and clarify doubts with faculty members, read beyond study packs, and write fluently in coursework and exams usually has a significant impact on their overall academic performance. Therefore, students who have attended a Russian-English academic lyceum or vocational college with a minimum IELTS of 5.5 can only be admitted to the IBC Foundation Year programme.

In addition, culture, historical traditions, and the teaching methodologies in Uzbekistan pre-tertiary education generally focus on teacher-centred in preference to student-centred learning. This leads to Uzbek students to expect to be passive recipients of information and to rely on summarised study packs instead of reading from the textbooks and other reference sources. They are not able to adopt an independent approach to learning and problem solving, especially applying critical analysis to essay writing and coursework preparation. Uzbek students expect lecturers/tutors to state the facts for them to memorise and regurgitate. Students who perform poorly in their academic study often suffer from the inability to adapt to the independent learning style in the international programme (Rahal & Palfreyman, 2009). Foreign faculty members face the challenge of adjusting their teaching methods to satisfy both the expectations of their institutions and the preferences of the students. It will be the students who usually have to adjust to the new styles of learning and lecturers/tutors will often need to offer additional guidance and support to students not familiar with student-centred learning methods.

In order to motivate students learning, transnational faculty members ought to understand that in different countries, students may have their own preferred learning styles (Mahrous & Ahmed, 2010). It is necessary therefore for foreign faculty members to suspend their assumptions about the teaching methods they have used elsewhere and to review the suitability of modifying their teaching methodologies for local contexts (Smith, 2009). In Uzbekistan, the first language is Uzbek, second language is Russian, third language is Tajik, and English is an optional language for the majority of students not only in the IBC, but also in other state universities in the country. Students may not be able to fully understand lectures, especially the subjects are full of technical jargon, therefore, transnational faculty members are advised to take note to allow time for them to digest in class.

Conclusion

In order to improve student learning outcomes, the home institution or IBC is advised to prepare transnational faculty members by providing advice and guidance on pedagogical issues or country-specific issues and differences before they are deployed abroad (Dunn & Wallace, 2006; McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007). This professional development would enhance their transnational teaching experience by developing their understanding on local culture and traditions, such as religious customs and family relationships and expectations, and avoid offending students. In addition, they would appreciate the personal and socio-economic factors affecting student performance. In order to adapt to local culture, they are advised to learn to respect students, being resilient to classroom culture, listen to their problems and provide advice, being friendly and having a sense of humour, being dedicated and knowledgeable in the subject

of teaching, and being patient and fair (Saafin, 2008).

Higher education reform in Uzbekistan is seen to be necessary to upgrade the embedded Soviet education system to benchmark against the international standards. With the establishment of three Russian- and four Western-based IBCs in Tashkent, the reconfiguration of post-Soviet higher education system in Uzbekistan has resulted in a hybrid of the East and West model of education system. Guidelines on education standards and intercultural competence of transnational teaching are available to all IBCs to enable a smoother transition to support the reform process.

The selection and recruitment of foreign faculty members in the IBC under study is usually based on their international teaching exposure as well as religious and cultural similarities with Uzbekistan. In general, students in the IBC have high regard for both the foreign faculty members and local lecturers/tutors. Professional development in intercultural competence is essential for faculty members working in transnational contexts. Cultural diversity in the global market place has shone the spotlight on intercultural competence as a very important skill for teaching staff (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Beside acquiring the right attitudes, knowledge and comprehension, and skills, the ability to adapt to other cultures, navigate one's emotions, learn intercultural sensitivity, and manage conflict are also key aspects of developing intercultural competence.

Since intercultural competence is not a naturally occurring phenomenon, it has to be intentionally addressed at the institutional level, i.e., either through pre-departure briefing by the home HEIs or dialogue sessions with the management of IBC. In utilising such a framework in orientation briefings and management dialogue sessions, the efforts toward developing intercultural competence in transnational faculty members can be included in a more comprehensive, integrated approach instead of through random, ad-hoc approaches that often occur at institutions. It is also important to assess these efforts so as to improve the process of developing intercultural competence among transnational faculty members and to also provide meaningful feedback to them that could help them on their intercultural journey.

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